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FCC plays fast and loose on media ownership

The Federal Communications Commission is playing fast and loose with the rules governing media ownership. Commission chairman Michael K. Powell (son of Secretary of State Colin Powell) has vowed to push ahead with a vote scheduled for June 2 to expand the number of media outlets one company can own. Consumer groups, many public-interest watchdogs and two of the five FCC commissioners believe that this rush to greater media ownership consolidation should be postponed.

Here's the big picture: Current regulations prohibit a company from owning both a newspaper and a TV station in the same market. They also prohibit any company from controlling access to more than 35 percent of the country's television viewers through subsidiaries it owns. Such limits allow for a greater diversity of news and opinion, which are essential to democracy and fairness.

There are causes for concern: Since the Gannett corporation — which already owned KPNX-TV Channel 12 — bought Central Newspapers, owners of the Arizona Republic, it was granted a temporary exception to the "cross-ownership" rule, that is, control of both a newspaper and television station in the same market. Gannett also owns the national five-day-a-week USA Today. If the current regulations remain in place, Gannett's ownership of Channel 12 will be carefully scrutinized when the time comes for the station's next license renewal and it could be forced to sell the newspaper or the TV station. In our community, we have already seen that the combined newsrooms of the Republic and Channel 12 have not led to better use of resources and more diverse coverage of

the area, but concerted efforts on the part of the station and the newspaper to focus their resources on the same targets.

In radio, since ownership was deregulated in 1996, Clear Channel Communications went from owning 43 radio stations to more than 1,200 today. It owns eight stations in the Phoenix broadcast market, operates Cricket Pavilion in west Phoenix and controls a large chunk of outdoor (billboard) advertising as well. The news presented on the eight Clear Channel stations here all comes from one newsroom. An example of the danger inherent in such concentrated control was seen in another region which experienced a hazardous material spill; when emergency officials attempted to contact the six big radio stations in town — all owned by one company — no one at any of the newsrooms answered the telephone for a full hour, because they were in fact, all the same newsroom and corporate staff cutbacks had created a short-staffing situation.

Clear Channel, which owns six stations in Tucson and three in Yuma in addition to its Phoenix holdings, is not the only major player in Arizona. Emmis Communications owns four radio stations in the Phoenix area and one TV station, KGUN, in Tucson. Infinity Broadcasting owns three radio stations.

If the FCC does away with television and newspaper ownership caps and the cross-ownership rule, analysts contend that a flurry of mergers will follow quickly. And once that happens, FCC Commissioner Michael J. Copps told an audience in Tempe last month, "You can't put the genie back in the bottle."

But the three Republican FCC commissioners want to make a fast decision and they want to loosen the ownership standards. However, those three commissioners have not taken advantage of a number of open forums around the country to hear from the public about the rules change — while Copps and his fellow Democrat Jonathan S. Adelstein have. The three Republicans have, however, listened plenty to media corporate executives.

And although Adelstein and Copps asked May 12 for a postponement of the June 2 vote, which is routinely granted when requested by a commissioner, according to the FCC, commissioner Kathleen Q. Abernathy urges the vote to

take place as planned. Even though she has not attended any of the recent public forums for input on the rules, she said, "I am satisfied that we have the information and the input we need to make a sound, judicially sustainable decision that will benefit the public interest."

Curiously, although media conglomerates like Clear Channel and Gannett have made time to speak to the FCC, both companies declined to send a representative to the April public forum on the matter in Tempe.

The Senate Commerce Committee, which oversees the FCC, held hearings on this topic recently and favors a postponement. Some in Congress have introduced bills to legally establish ownership criteria at current levels so that the FCC changes would not be legal. But still, three-fifths of the FCC commissioners are playing fast and loose with the airwaves and the press. They seem destined to railroad this through, despite objections that the public's interest is not only not protected, but is actually threatened by the rules changes. And the final form of those rule changes was only given to the commissioners last week, with the vote scheduled for less than three weeks later. The public may have little or no opportunity to comment on the final recommendations.

There may still be ways to slow down this runaway train:

- Contact the FCC. It's a long shot, but they might actually listen: Write to the Federal Communications Commission, 445 12th St. SW, Washington, DC, 20554; Call 1-888-CALL-FCC (225-5322); Submit comments via the Internet at www.fcc.gov/ownership.

- Contact the Senate Commerce Committee, especially Sen. John McCain, who chairs the committee and who values the input of his Arizona constituents: 41 Russell Senate Ofc. Bldg., United States Senate, Washington DC 20510; (202)224-2235; Fax: (202)228-2862; <http://mccain.senate.gov/>; or locally: (602)952-2410 and fax: (602)952-8702.

- Change the channel. Don't listen to the stations and don't buy the newspapers owned by the conglomerates. Let them know you are not satisfied with the diversity of news and opinion available.